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Toward Theatrical *Communitas*

The Return of *Communitas*

The term *communitas*, developed theoretically by anthropologist Victor Turner in the late 1960s, returned to humanist debates early in the twenty-first century by way of the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. Esposito's *Communitas. Origine e destino comunità* (*Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*),¹ first published in 1998, deals with the origins, manifestations, reconfigurations, and goals of community in contemporary political thought. He opens with his

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¹ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: Origine e destino comunità* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998). The book has been translated into languages from French and Spanish to Turkish.

convictions to reflect on issues about community in a manner free of totalitarian implications, due both to the collapse of communism as a political system and to the crisis of individualism that Western philosophy and populations faced. In doing so, Esposito also points out internal differences among discourses addressing the issue of community, and names their specific modalities: “communal, communitarian, communicative.”² Though he doesn’t provide detailed explanations, the meanings of these modalities can be deduced. The first relates to the issue of material and immaterial values all members in a given society share; the second presents a philosophical perspective to community’s decisive impact in forming the individuum; and the third indicates communication’s key significance in exchange and sharing.

Esposito, in presenting his overview of various concepts of community in the fields of political philosophy and sociology, identifies their shared tendency to conceptualize community as “a wider subjectivity” and “the unity of unities.”³ Not only does this assume the notion of community to be contingent on subjectivity, it also essentially compounds the idea of the subject by way of an understanding of community as a collection of individuals—thus shifting the focus away from the very idea of what is common. Meanwhile, the conception Esposito formulates abandons the dialectic between what is individually possessed versus the common, as such a shift makes it possible to concentrate on the idea of community itself. In order to avoid traps of political philosophy, he cites the etymology of *communitas* as a form of (co)existence where that which is common is at the same time that which isn’t owned, as everything is the property of the collective, not the individual. As the Roman rhetorician Quintilian’s famous maxim states, “quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium”: the “common” thus means something takes on a public character rather than a private one. Contained in the term *communitas*, however, is yet another semantic reference, in its root of *munus*, characterized by a slew of mutually illuminating as well as opposing meanings: “function,” “office,” “obligation,” “duty,” and “burden,” but also “aid,” “service,” and finally “gift.” From this semantic polyphony comes a specific understanding of a gift as an obligation, a need to offer a response, a gesture implying reciprocity and exchange.

This recognition of the obligatory nature of a gift at the root of *communitas*, as well as the need to reciprocate, leads directly to the conceptualization of the gift proposed by the ethnologist Marcel Mauss in his renowned 1924 essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. In turn, crossing personal boundaries and sacrificing oneself recalls the profound inspiration Esposito found

² Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 1. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³ Esposito, *Communitas*, 2.

in Georges Bataille's work. As Bataille emphasized, to experience community it's necessary to step out of and away from oneself and experience exaltation or even ecstasy—states in which he saw potential for the communication critical to thinking about community: "I only communicate outside of me by letting go or being pushed to this outside. Still, outside of me, I don't exist."⁴ Only the experience of losing the "I" can facilitate an opening to the alterity immanent to existence. In Bataille's interpretation, community doesn't emerge simply as a result of discovering one's otherness but via relations with an Other's other, and thus as a reciprocated act of stepping outside oneself, which also takes place simultaneously within that Other. Grasping this duality makes it possible to understand that Bataille's *communauté* means communication through experience, which is always a form of stepping outside the subject, in an abandonment of the very idea of subjectivity. For Bataille, as Esposito aptly notes, experience means "the experience of the lack (*destituzione*) of every subjectivity" and "coincides with the community, insofar as it is the unrepresentability of the subject to itself."⁵ Community thus becomes the quintessence of from-to movement, with no way to identify the subject and the object, and relies on the sharing of emptiness and lack, which border on death. Only death, which is "our common impossibility of being what we endeavor to remain, namely, isolated individuals,"⁶ can guarantee liberation from ownership, and thereby, an openness to *communitas*.

Esposito raises the relations between community and death, influenced by Bataille, which leads him to a theological interpretation of *communitas*, in which semantics from the Christian tradition overlap with the New Testament concept of *koinonia*. This term relates to community through participation, co-involvement—a kind of communion with origins in the personage and redemptive acts of Christ. The deeply theological interpretation of *koinonia* seems to be a maneuver diminishing its pre-Christian meanings. Among many semantic nuances of the term, Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* cites: "to have or do in common with, share, take part in a thing with another." In so doing this suggests the horizontal and human dimension of *koinonia* including in the Platonic context of *φιλία* as "an affectionate regard, friendship, usually between equals." It also indicates a quote from Euripides's *The Bacchae*, in line 1276, where *koinonia* denotes sexual intercourse: *γυναικὸς λαμβάνειν κοινωνίαν*.⁷ In turn, Esposito firmly ties *munus* to God's gift in the form of Christ's sacrifice and the possibility of humanity's participation in that sacrifice. He then expresses a belief that, as a consequence, all participation is of a vertical nature and that fraternity is not

⁴ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 24.

⁵ Esposito, *Communitas*, 117, 119.

⁶ Esposito, 121.

⁷ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, wiki implementation, accessed June 6, 2021, https://lsj.gr/wiki/#Greek_28Liddell-Scott.29.

characterized by horizontal interaction or friendship but relates to brotherhood in Christ, who becomes a constitutive alterity in the formation of the *communitas*. Such a reading ultimately leads Esposito to pit the anthropological and theological traditions against each other in the interpreting *communitas*: “Against a purely anthropological reading, one that is completely horizontal, one needs to respond firmly that it is only this first *munus* from on high that puts men in the position of having something in common with each other.”⁸

Esposito’s line of thinking leaves out anthropological dimensions of *communitas* and those aspects of being and acting together connected with purposefully inefficient, ostentatious, orgiastic, and immoderate “expenditure,” thus activities that serve no pragmatic aims. This becomes especially striking when we recall the analysis of excess energy and asset expenditure Marcel Mauss provided in the potlatch gift-giving ceremonies of peoples of the Pacific Northwest:

Nowhere else is the prestige of an individual as closely bound up with expenditure, and with the duty of returning with interest gifts received in such a way that the creditor becomes the debtor. Consumption and destruction are virtually unlimited. In some potlatch systems one is constrained to expend everything one possesses and to keep nothing.⁹

In Mauss’s essay, he describes how wealth, which has been painstakingly accumulated, is destroyed during these “agonistic” gatherings and feasts. The ostensible madness in this gesture of frivolously expending goods bears a function of collective cleansing and rejuvenation. It also recalls Bataille’s experience of ecstasy. Per Mauss, *munus* reveals a relation with *ludus*—with ludic behavior, spectacle, and thus an entire sphere of cultural performativity with its affective and symbolic excess.¹⁰ *Ludus* derives from the verb *ludere*—“to play something, dance, make merry, pretend, imitate, perform, play a role, poke fun at, fool, or deceive”—which renders visible the immanent theatricality in the root of *communitas*.

Looking at things from the perspective of *munus*, understood primarily as *ludus*, we arrive at a conception of community that can be described as ecstatic *communitas*, governed by an excess that suspends the daily order that has been constructed around rules normalizing social life. It is necessary then to reinstate the anthropological dimension in the study of *communitas*, therefore, not only to maintain a horizontal and egalitarian perspective in understanding community, but owing even more so to the need to broaden the thinking on community by

⁸ Esposito, *Communitas*, 10.

⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1966), 35.

¹⁰ In an anthropological interpretation, *ludus*—more specifically, the Greek παιδιά—denotes games, play, competition, and feast ceremonies (in its plural form, *ludi*), but also childish interplay, pastime, amusement, game, and fun.

including non-Western cultures and alternative forms of experience and cognition, and owing—in the perspective being reflected here, this point seems crucial—to the desire to unveil the aesthetic and creative dimension of *communitas*.

An Anthropological Imagination

In this introductory essay, I will argue that an anthropological interpretation of community provides the theoretical foundation for a concept of theatrical *communitas* that can be understood as an egalitarian form of togetherness, and which ought to be studied in its processuality and nonessential potentiality. Victor Turner first introduced the category of *communitas* to denote interpersonal relations that suspend a normative social order.¹¹ Turner presented this term to tap into the non-teleological dimension of human activity and interpersonal relations, which he saw as more of an effect of intuition and spontaneity than of conscious choice. Though all varieties of *communitas* are a critique of *societas* and its structures, relations between the two aren't binary in nature but dialectical and processual. First, *communitas* is the source of *societas*, though the yearning for *communitas* in fact arises in the bosom of *societas*. Second, the objective of *communitas* is to establish direct, egalitarian relations between its members. Third and lastly, the means by which anti-structuralities reveal themselves differ in their radicality, as Turner states:

I meant by it [*communitas*] not a structural reversal, a mirror-imaging of “profane” workaday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy-rejection of structural “necessities,” but the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles and being acutely conscious of membership of some corporate group as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation, etc., of affiliation with some pervasive social category as a class, caste, sex or age-division.¹²

Defining the emancipative nature of *communitas*, Turner clearly points to the power of imagination as a significant factor making possible the overcoming of limitations in normalized social structures, and driving creative activities that generate new forms of community.

¹¹ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969). Turner adapted the term from the 1947 book by Paul and Percival Goodman, in which utopian forms of urban planning and architecture were assessed. See Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas: Ways of Livelihood and Means of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947).

¹² Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 44.

In Turner's perspective, *communitas* is thus the antithesis of society-as-structure, but also a proto-structure of a potentially new community project. Possessing many qualities of flow, it "can generate and store a plurality of alternative models of living."¹³ This is reminiscent of Esposito's idea of "continuum of community,"¹⁴ in which the concept of subjectivity based on the separation of individuals caves in and a wealth of experience transcending subjectivity is made manifest. Both Turner and Esposito, meanwhile, indicate a danger to the community when individuals are separated from each other again. The latter's position that the *communitas* remains at risk because it internalizes that which is external, restores identity to that which has transgressed it, and has reduced that which is general to something common, is in keeping with Turner's concept of the processuality of *communitas* and its susceptibility to transforming again into a structure. "Once identified, be it with a people, a territory, or an essence, the community is walled in within itself and thus separated from the outside. This is how the mythical reversal takes place."¹⁵ Turner, meanwhile, points out how that spontaneous and free form of togetherness undergoes transformation, becoming either a more organized and galvanized normative *communitas* or producing an "ideological *communitas*, which is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models or blueprints of societies believed by their authors to exemplify or supply the optimal conditions for existential *communitas*."¹⁶

As Turner discusses the types of *communitas*—spontaneous (or existential), normative, and ideological—he does so to show the potential of ephemeral states transforming into phenomena that are more permanent, thus more akin to structures. Unlike Esposito, who steers clear of the territory of aesthetics in his ruminations on community, Turner associates *communitas* at the same time with a processuality suitable in performative phenomena from ritual and dance to theater. Turner's conception, by combining anthropological and aesthetic reflection, is easily transplanted into the field of art where it is applicable in the analysis of artistic activity. A good example of the successful application of *communitas* to theater is an essay by the anthropologist and cultural scholar Leszek Kolankiewicz, "Świntuch, bluźnierca, pantokrator, guru, heretyk, Grotowski" (Rake, blasphemer, pantocrator, guru, heretic, Grotowski). In Kolankiewicz's essay, he compares two productions that made waves on Warsaw's theater scene in the past half-century, both aimed at the Catholic Church: Jerzy Grotowski's *Apocalypsis cum figuris*,¹⁷ staged in 1971 in two versions at the Teatr Stara Prochownia, and Oliver Frlić's

¹³ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 33.

¹⁴ Esposito, *Communitas*, 120.

¹⁵ Esposito, 16.

¹⁶ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 169.

¹⁷ *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, written and directed by Jerzy Grotowski, premiered at Teatr Laboratorium in Wrocław, 1969.

Klątwa (*The Curse*), premiered in February 2017 at the Teatr Powszechny. In *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, criticism of institutional religion's repressing personal inner experience involved a subversive sense of fraternity generated in the audience in the theater, "a nonutilitarian experience of brotherhood and fellowship."¹⁸ In the *The Curse*, meanwhile, it was discourse—an anti-church attitude preconceived as a political program—that became the model for creating a free, equal community. As Kolankiewicz concluded:

What differentiates these plays includes the fact that arising in *Apocalypsis cum figuris* was a spontaneous existential *communitas* in the spirit of the counterculture period, while *The Curse* was designed from the outset with the aim of creating an ideological *communitas* in the spirit of the present day.¹⁹

The fact that Kolankiewicz noted the difference between these two forms of community emerging in the process of these respective instances of theatergoing togetherness doesn't change the fact that what was imparted by both performances was a radical denunciation of existing structures: namely, those of the institution of the Catholic Church. Both the normative and ideological *communitas* retain an anti-structural character since a *communitas*, as Turner saw it, doesn't directly relate to fixed social structures but instead to liminality, with its inherent status of being uncertain, unsettled, and equalizing as regards differences (social, economic, sexual, etc.). Liminality as a collective threshold state is also characterized by a high degree of performativity in symbolic actions, thereby, as the theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte states, "open[ing] cultural spaces for experimentation and innovation."²⁰ Such experimentation relates in equal measure to the area of social relations and to the field of aesthetics, making it possible to treat art as something of a laboratory for the study of "the astructural model of human interconnectedness."²¹

The perspective Turner proposed thus facilitates the study of liminoidal²² traits possessed by art, especially by the immanently communal art of theater. It is mainly in theater's experimental and avant-garde forms, typically taking shape

¹⁸ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 169.

¹⁹ Leszek Kolankiewicz, "Świntuch, bluźnierca, pantokrator, guru, heretyk, Grotowski," accessed June 6, 2021, <http://re-sources.uw.edu.pl/reader/swintuch-bluznierca-pantokrator-guru-heretyk-grotowski/>. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations translated by Simon Wloch.

²⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Einleitung: Zur Aktualität von Turners Studien zum Übergang vom Ritual zum Theater," in Victor Turner, *Vom Ritual zum Theater: Das Ernst des menschlichen Spiels*, trans. Sylvia M. Schomburg-Scherff (Frankfurt: Campus Bibliothek, 2009), vii.

²¹ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 51.

²² It is significant that Turner chose the term "liminoidality" to denote the transformative nature of experimental art and other activities in industrialized societies. He believed that liminality ought to be used only in describing the experience of rites of passage in traditional societies.

at the margins of or in gaps within normative structures, that innovative forms of interpersonal life emerge. In the sphere of symbolic artistic activity, testing aesthetic norms and limits, there exists potential for a theatrical *communitas*: an alternative to dominant models of interaction and conceptions of community in society. But the reverse also holds true: art's transformative potential can arise in ephemeral theater communities and lead to conceptualizations of utopian and pluralistic forms of togetherness.

Liminality, however, doesn't signify transformation's positive nature exclusively—occasionally, it takes the form of radical negativity, leading to a breakdown of the performance's effectiveness and of the existing community. As Turner writes: "Liminality may be the scene of disease, despair, death, suicide, the breakdown without compensatory replacement of normative, well-defined social ties and bonds."²³ Showing how close relations are between theatrical *communitas* and liminality thus understood is Sarah Kane's dramatic work, saturated as it is with anthropological imagination. In her first play, *Blasted* (1995), Kane provoked a revolution in British theater as she forced audiences from the safe space guaranteed by realistic conventions into a theater of cruelty aiming to revive both theater and individuals through aestheticized violence. Kane set her drama in a hotel room within which audiences are witnesses to sexual violence between Ian and Cate. Yet she does this only to show that this intimate sphere is actually but a component in a larger whole—that of global politics, to which the British public had maintained indifference. In fact, as the playwright Steve Waters aptly points out, in the 1990s military violence was occurring everywhere but in the West:

the dominant mode of violence in the 1990s was in fact internecine war—conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, inter-ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the first invasion of Chechnya and the horror of the Rwandan genocide. Violence, for the West at least, was elsewhere, done to others by others.²⁴

Kane, placing the action in a hotel that could be right next door, executes a radical reversal of meaning and propels the audience into the epicenter of danger.

In *Blasted*, the intimate sphere is literally transformed into a sphere of war, with the attending collapse in dramatic form and the sensory annihilation that ensues. This transpires in a scene in which a mortar round strikes the hotel room, manifesting real war, one that had ostensibly been external to the world depicted. As Kane explains:

²³ Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1979), 43–44.

²⁴ Steve Waters, "Sarah Kane: From Terror to Trauma," in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880–2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 373, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470751480.ch31>.

And I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization and I think the wall between so called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time. . . . And then I thought: What this needs is what happens in war—suddenly, violently, without any warning, people’s lives are completely ripped to pieces. . . . I’ll plant a bomb, just blow the whole fucking thing up.²⁵

“The whole fucking thing” isn’t just the hotel room as a setting characteristic of global reality, anonymous and faceless, or only the people occupying it, but, above all, is in fact the playscript itself. The rupture of the drama’s realist form, the spatial transgression of what had been a duality of inner (the hotel room) and outer (war), and the metamorphosis of the language of theater into the language of poetry make for a moment in which the liminoidality of art is made manifest. This approaches the form of ritual liminality, which as Turner writes “is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.”²⁶ In *Blasted*, the scene after the explosion, when all that remains of the hotel room is a massive hole in one wall and a cloud of dust, strongly alludes to the primal scene. It’s no fluke that the first word Ian utters in this space of utter anarchy, now abruptly stripped of all recognizable form, is “Mum?” After that word, a series of silent images of violence appear: masturbation, oral sex, rape, a child being buried under the floor, cannibalism. The sequence ends with ritual cleansing by blood and water—which, instead of leading to escape from the danger zone, opens a new cycle of violence.

Kane’s drama, by taking the intensity of events to the extreme then coupling it with a stark reduction in language being articulated, conclusively approaches the syntax of Antonin Artaud’s theater of cruelty: “The true theatre, like poetry as well,” as Artaud put it, “is born out of a kind of organized anarchy.”²⁷ It is thus possible to regard Kane’s play as an attempt to revive symbolic exchange by reintroducing death in the social realm after its banishment from industrialized societies. Jean Baudrillard, in his *Symbolic Exchange and Death*,²⁸ argued that the symbolic violence of Western capital includes the creation of a situation in which reciprocity of gift-giving is made impossible. Then the sole means of counteraction is to force the capitalist system into another symbolic exchange, which can only be accomplished with a counter-gift in the form of death. For Kane, the theater as the place for manifesting the social crisis of structural indifference to Others’ deaths simultaneously becomes a place for the rebirth, from chaos and anarchy,

²⁵ Quoted in Aleks Sierz, *In Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 100–102.

²⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 95.

²⁷ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 51.

²⁸ See Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993).

of an exchange of signs and symbols. By embracing an anthropological examination of violence, death, and victimhood, and by formally drawing theater closer to a rite of passage, Kane's work presents a proposal of community that, while most extreme in the view of Western society, functions outside of the logic of efficacy, accumulation, and profit—a non-performance *communitas*.

Theater as a Gift of Nothing

In the sociologist and anthropologist Jean Duvignaud's *Le don du rien* (The gift of nothing, 1977), he expands on Marcel Mauss's thinking and elucidates his own theory on a feast. In such specific events in social life, Duvignaud finds both an astructural dynamic in interpersonal relations and a liminal nature to the human aesthetic instinct, with the latter invoking forms of togetherness revolving around unneeded, intensive expenditures of social energy. The feast, as it "pierces the discourse," approaches something of a paradox: an excessive expenditure that Duvignaud calls a "gift of nothing" (*le don du rien*).

Giving is losing. Messing up. In this, there's no thought of returns or reciprocation. This works when there's no economic view. . . . One gives, as you're nothing and giving yourself to nothing, certainly not to the divine image society puts between giver and the void.²⁹

Duvignaud is describing the feast of Sidi Soltane, which he observed in Chebika, a village in Tunisia. By nothing being given for nothing, loss is expended by one's self and by others, and only by way of this radical negativeness can the sense of communal bonds be refreshed. Thus did Duvignaud formulate his notion of community, one which opposes capitalistic efficacy and utilitarianism, becoming something of an inverse to performance in its take on productiveness and effectiveness. While not aimed at wastefulness, the desire is to reorganize social life. The feast of Sidi Soltane thus constitutes an apparently nonutilitarian game. It is an expression of pure delight in suspending mundane constraints, however short-lived. It involves a specific experience of "being nothing," which then assures the fullest extent of humanity: "A gift, shorn of our commercial notions, is indeed the 'unneeded sacrifice,' a bet on the impossible, toward the future—a gift of nothing. The best part of humankind."³⁰

²⁹ Jean Duvignaud, *Le don du rien: Essai d'anthropologie de la fête* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2012), 213. All quotations from Duvignaud translated by editors with Alan Lockwood.

³⁰ Duvignaud, *Le don du rien*, 10.

In *La Solidarité: liens de sang et liens de raison* (Solidarity: Ties of blood and ties of reason, 1986), Duvignaud refines his idea of feast communality, writing about it as a break in the prevailing order of social relations and a departure from the rhythm of daily life. Moreover, he sees in it a momentary state that generates a quaint, unique and temporary kind of solidarity—a temporal *communitas*. This ephemeral form of togetherness differs considerably from a permanent community, a nation or society that achieves its validity through the repetition of gestures, behaviors, social performances, and rituals. When we adapt such a perspective on theater, it may in fact be the very art form that, in its characteristic aesthetic excesses, forgoes any and all material accumulation and sidesteps the market economy. Theater is instead a nonutilitarian and excessive expenditure of material goods. This ephemeral, collective nature means it doesn't leave any permanent object to circulate in the art market. As viewed from the economic perspective—which converts all objects into products with monetary value—theater seems an activity with no clearly defined point and aim, a kind of useless *communitas*. The huge outlay of human energy (and often costs) associated with the production of a play is wholly consumed in executing production needs and in an ultimate experience of pleasure in being together, and only extends for a finite time period. Yet pure wastefulness, as Duvignaud would say, is something far more than a calculated investment.

Duvignaud's vision of the feast assuredly grew out of his experience of the counterculture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the anthropological concept of *communitas* was becoming a cornerstone in the formation of theater communities. The historian Theodore Roszak, summing up the antiestablishment movement in North America and Western Europe in 1969, posited that countercultural formations could replace existing authoritarian forms of leadership shaped by Christian influences and by those dictates regarding how collectives should function.³¹ Rejection of the Western myth of individualism, combined with revolutionary attitudes on sexuality, women's rights, and antiauthoritarian and anti-military forms of government, led to an explosion of alternative forms of social life and of experimental creative projects. Under the influence of such ideas, and emerging in protest to institutionalized theater companies, were "collectives and associations of people who share a common vision, who work together to develop a style of performing,"³² in the words of Richard Schechner, leader of the Performance Group, founded in 1967.

In the field of theater, countercultural experiences reverberated most strongly first in Jerzy Grotowski's poor-theater concept, and later in his paratheatrical work.

³¹ See Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).

³² Richard Schechner, "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde: Why It Happened and What We Can Do about It," *Performing Arts Journal* 5, no. 2 (1981): 54.

Grotowski directly referenced the notion of the holiday in his text “Święto,”³³ from stenographic transcripts of a conference in New York City on December 13, 1970, that Grotowski had participated in at Schechner’s invitation. There, Grotowski formulated the idea for a form of activity that would transcend the artistic formula of theater—which he believed to be fully exhausted—and blend in new kinds of interpersonal relations to bring about a sociocultural revival. By that point, Grotowski had been contemplating theater’s potential evolution into non-theater, or more-than-theater, which he understood not as an institution, but as a common place and a group-discovery. For Grotowski, theater is reliant on human togetherness (“człowiecze obcowanie”), as our bodies always imply the presence of other human beings.³⁴

Grotowski’s concept of the holiday, extending from abandoning theater as a place where it had proved impossible to completely remove divisions between performer and audience, was to generate a new type of presence and bond among those participating in a situation of being together. What’s significant here is that experience drawn from theater played a crucial role: an awareness of ways in which people gathered and conjoined, a familiarity with the temporary suspension of social roles during a gathering, possibilities of active mutual impact made between group members, and finally the key role of action—of doing—in the study of human existence, are clearly aspects taken from the practice of creating and observing the entire theater collective.

On the basis of those experiences, Grotowski made fundamental transpositions in explorations centered on the effect of human coexistence, which the philosopher Martin Buber had called *das Zwischenmenschliche* (the Interhuman), and which Turner termed existential *communitas*. Grotowski moved away from the sociologist Erving Goffman’s conception of humans permanently enacting and presenting themselves in a never-ending process of performance. Instead, he took on a perspective of humans being able to fully experience existence via a complete act that transcends the framework of theater—“in common with someone, with several, in a group—discovery, discovering oneself and them.”³⁵ In this phase of his explorations, Grotowski placed emphasis on people encountering other people and nature, which rouses the body into action. Taking a step back from both civilization and a functionality-based lifestyle generated the kind of proximity that engendered abandoning mundane social-interaction frameworks while activating senses beyond just eyesight in experiencing the Other. Of particular importance here was touch—so foreign to theater yet so innate to relations with nature. In

³³ See Jerzy Grotowski, “Święto,” *Odra*, no. 6 (1972): 47–51. Segments are translated as “Holiday: The Day That Is Holy,” in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, eds. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford Wylam (London: Routledge, 1997).

³⁴ See Jerzy Grotowski, “Co było,” in *Teksty zebrane*, eds. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek et al. (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2012), 496.

³⁵ Grotowski, “Święto,” 47.

“Święto,” Grotowski directly contemplates this connection between community and the sense of touch. When he speaks of human-to-human devotion, he used the terms “sibling of earth, sibling of senses, sibling of sun, sibling of touch,” simultaneously indicating that the sibling is “the body and blood,” “the bare foot and the naked skin,” facilitating the encounter with the Other:

In this encounter, a person neither withholds nor imposes themselves. They allow themselves to be touched and do not force their presence. They go forth and do not fear the eyes of others, whole. As if saying with oneself: you are, therefore I am; and also: I am born for you to be born, for you to come into existence; and also: don't be afraid, I walk with you.³⁶

Grotowski's manner of finding the meaning of the sense of touch in the formation of new forms of interpersonal relations recalls the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of community (*la communauté*). Nancy's idea is deeply connected with his thinking on corporality, and especially touch. He argues that touch accounts for being able to step out of oneself and beyond the boundary of one's own body toward an Other. At the same time, it stops at the surface—on the skin—not permitting interference to or penetration of the flesh, precluding violence being inflicted on the Other. Touch is not a “communion of bodies”—rather than their complete unification or an absorption of otherness, it is an openness to otherness. It doesn't intend to erode the difference between the I and the you (between one and another singular), creating instead a proximity that preserves distance:

From one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up. All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation; moreover, it is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other. Contact is beyond fullness and emptiness, beyond connection and disconnection.³⁷

In Grotowski's work, the singularity transcending the idea of the individual found its most complete manifestation in his late-1980s concept of the Performer as a person of action. Performer, with a *P*, no longer applied to art, and no longer related to either a person playing someone else or a person presenting their own experiences. Neither did it constitute a recognizable identity. The Performer form

³⁶ Grotowski, 51. In translating these passages for the present volume, “sibling” is used in place of *brat* (“brother”), along with inclusive-singular pronouns, rather than adhering to the masculine-exclusive terminology symptomatic of that period. It is the author and editors' aim to render them most actual, and to emphasize their significance in our present context.

³⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 5.

of existence is a permanent process and action which opens one up to otherness in order to trigger cognition through doing, and not only through thinking.

Anti-Relational Relationality in Radical Performance

Queer performance art of the 1990s played an immense role in the redefinition of theater community, encompassing the radical body-art scene represented by the work of artists including Ron Athey, Julian Snapper, and Franco B., as well as the practices of queer communities. Their critical stance on social norms and institutions operating in the name of heteronormativity—touted almost universally as the prevailing “common sense”—led to the rejection of community as an absolute value, and to a radical manifestation of singularity and negativity. In José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, the queer theorist became the first to elucidate the concept of queer failure, which was then artfully expanded on by literature and gender studies scholar Judith Jack Halberstam in *The Art of Failure*, which showed queerness as the possibility of rejecting pragmatic logic in social relations.

However, the utopian refusal to participate in a society based on rules of efficacy while oriented to professional success, accumulation of capital, and/or biological reproduction, doesn’t have to lead to total negation of all forms of togetherness. Muñoz traced out a perspective to escape the dilemma, relying on Jean-Luc Nancy’s category of “being singular plural,” which makes it possible to combine criticism of social bonds with a relationality understood in an alternative manner:

For Nancy the post-phenomenological category of being singular plural addresses the way in which the singularity that marks a singular existence is always conterminously plural. . . . Thus, if one attempts to render the ontological signature of queerness through Nancy’s critical apparatus, it needs to be grasped as both antirelational and relational. . . . To some extent *Cruising Utopia* is a polemic that argues against antirelationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity.³⁸

To talk about queerness as a specific type of collectivity, Muñoz draws attention to terms like “ghosts,” “memory,” “longing,” and “utopia,” which activate counter-hegemonic ways of being based on relations between the living and the dead. Queer communities reinstate ghosts into social life—both in the anonymous sexual practice of cruising and in rituals for mourning AIDS victims—which in a certain sense are haunting heteronormativity as a system. This connection

³⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 10.

between memory and utopia, melancholy and desire, intended to build a spectral *communitas*, is superbly illustrated by the work of Ron Athey. His practice straddles the line between body art and experimental theater of ecstasy to explore the liminality and politics of the body. This isn't strictly manifesting a lineage from Artaud's ritual theater of cruelty and from radical performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, but includes an obscene intervention in the 1990s culture wars in the States.

Athey, in performances including *Torture Trilogy* (1992–1995), *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1994), *Deliverance* (1995), and *Solar Anus* (1998), put his own HIV-infected body on stage to explore sexuality and death in the AIDS-crisis era. The blood, pain, homosexuality, and total exhaustion acknowledged as signs of the realness of Athey's anti-body were always presented in the context of theatricality: using fetishes, music, lighting, wardrobe, and makeup, or by referencing Renaissance paintings (Guido Reni, Andrea Mantegna, Sandro Botticelli), the literary avant-garde (Georges Bataille, Jean Genet, Yukio Mishima), contemporary visual artists (David Wojnarowicz), film icons (Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich), and finally by showcasing his tattooed body in a manner reminiscent of religious ceremonies or rituals. Spotlighting relations between visuality and theatricality, between abstraction and performance, between the body and the culture archive, Athey accomplished in his work an aesthetically generated transgressive effect that proved to be a key strategy in communication with the Other—in sharing the extremely personal experience of incurable illness. Born from this ritual exploration of a single anti-body is the queer *communitas*, which, as Muñoz sees it, makes it possible “to decipher the networks of commonality and the structures of feeling that link queers across different identity markers, including positive and negative antibody status as well as bodies separated along generational lines.”³⁹

Transhuman Bondings and Kinships

Since the 1980s, anthropological thinking on *communitas* has undergone a radical transformation, with significant impact on reformulating the idea of theater as a form of commonality. This was precipitated by the actor-network theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour and others and by Donna Haraway's critique of the institution of knowledge proposed in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”⁴⁰ and expanded on in subsequent writings. ANT's chief benefit was that it recognized the interconnectedness of relations functioning both between people and between people and other agents, to which people are always tied to some degree. Latour, positing that social

³⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 47.

⁴⁰ Donna Haraway's “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” was first published in *Socialist Review*, no. 80 (1985): 65–108.

relations develop between heterogeneous actors, put forth a novel critique of classic sociological concepts including society, structure, and interaction, offering a new vision of what is common. Above all, he argues that all kinds of heterogeneous entities can become social actors since the condition for agency isn't language. The belief that clusters of actors create meaning and that networks are ephemeral in nature reveals the performative aspect of networks composed of humans and other actors, rendering the repeated performance of social relations not only possible but necessary. When Latour acknowledged actors to be entities both human and nonhuman (any phenomenon or thing having the potential to act and thus capable of becoming an actor when assuming an identifiable form), he forever associated his theory with theater, opening the door to theater metaphors and to its stage appropriation.

Haraway's speculations also revealed their performative-theatrical dimension from the very beginning, as she combined her reflections on natural, cultural, and technological phenomena with a belief that knowledge is always situated in practice and that science is a kind of cultural performance. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Haraway leaves behind the deterministic discourse of biology, pointing out nature's entanglement with technology and the latter's critical impact on social relations, while also studying how entities interact and various ways in which their hybridity is made manifest. Haraway's renowned declaration that "we are all cyborgs" related as much to the feminist community (not reduced to biological parameters) as it did to a *communitas* of multiply displayed figures, on account of the hybrid and monstrous, mixed, plural nature of cyborg subjectivity: "the hybrid peoples, the conquest peoples, the enslaved peoples, the non-original peoples, the dispossessed native Americans."⁴¹ Haraway's interest in all social actors excluded from both the system and the discourse would generate further contemplations on other human–nonhuman bondings and kinships. In *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2013), one area she examined were deep bonds formed between dogs and other "nonhuman critters," before going on in her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble* to fully articulate her conception of making kin in a world divided by an uneven distribution of goods and suffering. What is significant is that Haraway recognizes anthropocentrism to be a historically constructed identity and saddles it with responsibility for the ecological catastrophe and irrecoverable losses inflicted on our planet. She does, however, argue that groups of various species can be revived on condition that biotic and abiotic forces—meaning the living environment's forces—work in tandem with those of the inanimate environment.⁴² This new reality would take shape as a kind of composite, and a new history will

⁴¹ Donna Haraway, "Cyborgs at Large," interview by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 16.

⁴² See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 101–102.

be told in which we rethink relations between homo sapiens and nature. In that instance, actors other than humans will come into play—and about the latter, Haraway writes: “It is hard to tell a good story with such a bad actor.”⁴³ The story of the Anthropocene, revolving around that single actor—the human species—must give way to the story of the Chthulucene. Concepts of key importance for her aren’t those of identity or synthesis but rather those of categories revealing polyphonic connections: “sympoiesis, symbiosis, symbiogenesis, webbed ecologies, and microbes.”⁴⁴ For Haraway, making kinships in the Chthulucene doesn’t denote biological kinship but a kind of lasting, mutual, obligatory connection with human and ultra-human entities. In this, Haraway’s kin begin to resemble the gift in Mauss’s interpretation, as a mandatory gesture of reciprocation. There is, however, one fundamental difference: Haraway doesn’t reserve belonging to one’s own kind only to humans, and in this, is in a better position to respond to challenges of the present.

The paradigm shift that occurred in anthropological conceptions on community due to Latour and Haraway—tantamount to a Copernican Revolution—had a tremendous impact on contemporary performing arts, and consequently on the idea of theatrical *communitas*. One instance of executing a staged deconstruction of human exceptionalism in spectacular fashion was carried out by director Krzysztof Garbaczewski and dramaturge Marcin Cecko, with their *Życie seksualne Dzikich* (*The Sexual Life of Savages*) in 2011. Along with the architect Aleksandra Wasilkowska’s stage design and a cast of uncompromising actors, mostly from Warsaw’s Nowy Teatr, they created a kind of staged laboratory in which to study humans (or what remains of humans) and their complex connections with nature and technology. In the play, based on the diaries of the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, the creators of *The Sexual Life of Savages* assiduously demolished essentialisms of the anthropological perspective, undermining notions of gender, race, sexuality, and animate and inanimate matter, while examining lines drawn between humans and animals and between humans and machines. In Garbaczewski and Cecko’s play, the anthropology that Malinowski embodies, striving for “scientific objectivity,” is revealed to be a faulty vehicle in a search for permanent structures in reality and of universal paradigms. Malinowski is an exemplification of rationality, of language skills, even of channeling one’s energy as if it were fundamentally different from naturalistic instinct. His encounter with the Savages with whom he shares the stage, hitherto a negative point of reference in the so-called civilized world, proved homo sapiens to be just one among many actors in today’s forms of relationality.

⁴³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

⁴⁴ Haraway, 49–50.

The humanity represented in *The Sexual Life of Savages*—or rather acted out by contemporary savages—falls outside the scale differentiating man from animal and man from machine.⁴⁵ Here, nature doesn't exist without technology, or hyperconsciousness without instinct, and the theatrical stage transforms into a science lab. Studying the ontological status of savages is, however, not an abstract pursuit, but one entrenched in history. "History as fur means a lot," as the character Aria tells the Outsider, underlining the organic-animalistic dimension of human history. "With time, your hair grows, gets thicker. It all comes from knowledge, which you place on this gelatinous mass right here. Through experience forming the shapes beneath the fur."⁴⁶

The land of the Savages, therefore, exhibits a temporal dimension as well as a historical one—it's a Gray Zone, a settlement of "civilizational fugitives" who deliberately isolate themselves from economic structures based on production and reproduction. At a crucial point, Garbaczewski's actors, as mutant-figures belonging to the Savages' territory, show their naked bodies, submerging them in a water-filled copper basin, engaging in an elaborate cleansing ritual. By joining other bodies in the water and earth, they seek a form of community based on love and freed of possessions. The Savages, critical of modern civilization and opposed to values promoted by the capitalist system, yearn to recover the remains of the Kula ritual [the complex gift-exchange circuit among Trobriand Islanders in Papua New Guinea]—their sole pursuits are contemplation and free exchange, including offering up themselves and their bodies. They take from others and share what is their own, creating "a network of entangled senses, tender, lazy bodies, minds hungry for stimulation."⁴⁷

This clan of human copies, animalistic mutants, technological beings, thus undermines Malinowski's extremely rationalistic, biologically based stance as a researcher on sexuality. In his book *The Sexual Life of Savages*, Malinowski assigns key issues of "unknown paternity" and "ignorance of the physiological aspect of paternity" to animism.⁴⁸ He lamented that awareness of physical and physiological facts was supplanted by a belief in myths involving reincarnation—beliefs closely integrated with the Trobriand Islanders' entire animistic system. Malinowski remained unconvinced of Trobrianders' complete ignorance of "the fertilizing virtue of seminal fluid," and postulated that their understanding of physiological fatherhood "may be overlaid and distorted by mythological and

⁴⁵ This production was described and analyzed in Dorota Sajewska, "The Postmortal Life of Savages: Witkiewicz and Malinowski Disinterred," *TDR/The Drama Review* 60, no. 1 (2016): 132–149, https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00528.

⁴⁶ Marcin Cecko, *Życie seksualne Dzikich*, trans. Olga Mystowska (unpublished manuscript provided by Nowy Teatr, Warsaw, 2011), 31.

⁴⁷ Cecko, *Życie*, 1.

⁴⁸ Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia: An Ethnographic Account of Courtship, Marriage, and Family Life Among the Natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea* (New York: Eugenic Publishing, 1929), 179.

animistic beliefs.”⁴⁹ In Garbaczewski and Cecko’s production, this “ignorance of paternity” that Malinowski treats as a primitive mental state is replaced with a level of technological advancement in which reproduction may occur independently of biology. Here, animism takes the form of techno-animacy, where spirits, memories, and the past could be made to return with the use of technology, cloning, and a network-structured reality and community.

Wasilkowska, in her set design, presented this speculative variant of a hybrid form of commonality materially—her autonomous installation, the Black Island, was modeled on a map of Papua New Guinea from 1600 that Malinowski describes in his *The Sexual Life of Savages*. In the production, this enormous Black Island has a unique presence: it is a key performer, suspended above the stage, moving in its elevated position throughout the course of the performance on the basis of a precise algorithm derived from actors’ movements. The Savages’ fictional territory was thus conceived as an inverted island: living, migrating in place, and dominating the entire space, the Black Island “oversaw” the entire performance. Thanks to this concept of a meta-mechanical performer broaching the boundary between “living bodies” of the audience and cast and “lifeless objects in the set,” a certain post-anthropocentric reality emerged, dominated by the energy of the earth and territory, as opposed to that of people and machines.⁵⁰

The Sexual Life of Savages is among the examples of contemporary-theater projects in which the enactment of interpersonal relations is being increasingly replaced with the creation of communities that are more-than or different-from the exclusively human—hybrid and pluriversal *communitas*. Communities of this kind reach beyond anthropocentric thinking in studying human beings’ dynamic relations with other beings and with biological, technological, or geological phenomena. Projects aiming to examine mixed entities and interspecies kinships are often of a transversal nature themselves. Employing to various degrees tools of art and science along with possibilities offered by contemporary technologies, they help broaden the stage reality by incorporating elements inaccessible through direct means. Technology provides tools that in theater, being a living, presentative art, make it possible to implement analog and now, increasingly, virtual media.

These specific characteristics are key to the experimental lab Dream Adoption Society (DAS), initiated by Krzysztof Garbaczewski in 2017 in Warsaw, which develops computer-generated virtual environments, while studying performative acts in the fields of theater and visual arts in the context of digital and virtual reality (VR).⁵¹ The collective comprises VR artists Nastia Vorobiowa, Magda Nawrot, Jagoda Wójtowicz, and Maciej Gniady, producing virtual spaces and avatars, and

⁴⁹ Malinowski, 180–181.

⁵⁰ See Aleksandra Wasilkowska, “Tworzenie rzyzyka,” interview by Jakub Papuczys, *Didaskalia*, no. 103/104 (2011): 89.

⁵¹ <https://dreamadoptionsociety.com/>.

Wojtek Markowski, a VR producer specializing in various new technologies—and with Garbaczewski and his close collaborators, the DAS team explore new connections between theater and virtuality. Demonstrating possibilities of applying newly available solutions offered by VR and augmented reality (AR) in theater, their joint projects also broaden the very definition of theater, in which a live human is now just a component, and not necessarily a crucial one.

Some Dream Adoption Society projects are autonomous VR installations presented in galleries or incorporated into live performances. Others, however, are hybrid events combining the experience of the “liveness” of theater with an experience of digitality. These serve as something of a meta-commentary on the essence of theater and theatricality—for instance, Sandra Korzeniak’s brilliant monologue *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (2017), based on Antonin Artaud’s radio play from 1947, and a VR variation, “Some Thoughts on Plato,” in which the DAS team reference Dionysus’s ecstatic rituals and fantasize on the subject of a community of love. As liminoidal events, these new digital-theater projects can take individual spectators into other dimensions and facilitate immersive communication—as with, for example, hologram interactions in the project *The Artist Is (all but) Present* (2019)—or make it possible to experience immersion in a different reality along with other spectator-participants. Thus an immersive *communitas* is being conceived, combining live acts of performance, choreography, and music with virtual reality. Which aims for spiritual exploration within an understanding of reality radically expanded to include more-than-human communities.

The piece *New Territory* (2018), directed by Garbaczewski and intending to foster just such an immersive community, was presented at Warsaw’s Teatr Powszechny and at the Performing Garage in New York City. Markowski, the VR producer of *New Territory*, noted:

When the theater show starts, the experiencer finds him/herself among ten actors and around thirty to fifty participants. After the first twenty minutes of the show, there’s this magical moment: the actors give the participants VR goggles in exchange for a physical bonsai tree-like object the audience receive upon entering the show. This object appears later in the virtual environment, too. One can see his/her body as an avatar but also the other viewers—however, the avatars have the faces of the actors.⁵²

The show’s creators defined it as a reference to the “art as a vehicle” concept, thus recalling the final stage of Jerzy Grotowski’s explorations. Here, theater was no longer meant to be a form of artistic creativity but a spiritual process, a way toward

⁵² Wojtek Markowski, “VR, Theatre and the Importance of Immersion,” interview by Ágnes Karolina Bakk, *ZipScene Magazin*, April 1, 2020, <https://zip-scene.com/2020/04/01/vr-theatre-and-the-importance-of-immersion/>.

the “person of action,” whom Grotowski saw as the only and real Performer. Thus, the creators of *New Territory* accomplished a brash reinterpretation of the idea of the Performer, as they pointed out both that cognition isn’t limited to human actors and that theater itself isn’t exclusively a human domain, passed down from generation to generation by a series of avant-garde artists.

The Revival/Rearousal of Theater’s Avant-Garde

In Richard Schechner’s 1981 essay “The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde,” diagnosing and analyzing causes behind the exhaustion of avant-garde theater’s potential, he pointed to a crisis of social activism accelerating since the 1970s and the spread of a “new conservatism,” along with deepening economic crisis and “populist ideals against experimental elites,”⁵³ then finally to the disintegration of theater collectives. In examining increasingly strong individualistic tendencies in the Performance Group, tensions growing between members, their disputes on what methods to use, and the dreadful economic situation exacerbating crises within the group, Schechner was also able to formulate an interesting vision for the survival of the idea of community in theater. A key means of facilitating this was the transmission of performance knowledge through workshop techniques being passed along in a “body to body” manner.⁵⁴ Schechner’s theatrical and academic work was substantially influenced by Grotowski, following the latter’s concept of “body-memory.”⁵⁵ After leaving theater, Grotowski developed ideas of the bodily transmission of experience; for years in his anthropological work, he then practiced performative methods of passing on knowledge, based on group workshops and transgressive collective actions.

Yet in the context of experimental theater, this continues to be original. It relates to the obvious continuation of Performance Group methods by the Wooster Group in New York City, and also to the less readily perceptible aesthetic connections between theater artists, as is precisely the case with Krzysztof Garbaczewski. The director’s work is based on the idea of collective creativity, while relying on various forms of community as a subject. In this regard, it fits wonderfully into traditions of avant-garde theater collectives. The autonomous nature of Garbaczewski’s experiments at the intersections of theater, performance art, choreography, and VR indicate that performative means of transmitting knowledge aren’t exclusively limited to first-hand transmission from body to body, as Schechner and Grotowski

⁵³ Schechner, “The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde,” 54.

⁵⁴ Schechner, 56.

⁵⁵ See Dorota Sajewska, “Ciało-pamięć, ciało-archiwum,” *Didaskalia*, no. 127/128 (2015): 48–56.

believed. The human body represents only one form of transmission, most firmly connected with the art of acting's quest for new forms of expression, an art still traditionally understood as reserved for humans. Meanwhile, in the territory of contemporary-theater experimentation, of equal importance in building aesthetic communities is inspiration drawn from film, literature, and philosophy, transmitted via experience and regularly mediated by analog and digital means. This mediated experience surpasses the understanding of the body as unit of organic matter associated with biological human existence, introducing to the theater stage a hybrid of body and machine, human and earth, human and animal. What's more, it heralds communities of a transversal nature, in which the human is but one of many actors creating and responsible for social relations—and, as noted above, not necessarily the crucial one.

Viewing circumstances from this perspective, I propose treating the theater avant-garde as a transversal aesthetic *communitas* in which features don't result from a direct continuation of a specific creative method by way of imitation. No less significant are influences and inspirations that don't lend themselves to linear reconstruction, associated with radically experimental traditions in twentieth-century theater, art, film, and performance. From this viewpoint, the theater avant-garde appears as both a historical formation and as a kind of experience and communication that, thanks to the power of imagination, transcends time and space. Contemporary theater artists attempting to generate connections between human and nonhuman entities on stage—physically or virtually—are again eliminating theater's seemingly constitutive division into stage and audience.

Yet do they engage all participants present on equal terms, creating something along the lines of a feast, or of Jerzy Grotowski's holiday? Do theater events involving actors both human and nonhuman have the qualities of nonutilitarian play, or are they also at times in a kind of dark game for power and influence? Do people still control nonhuman entities, or has the vector of domination already switched? Is new theater evoking a desire for *communitas*—a longing for liminal and liminoidal situations—in more-than-human actors as well? Is it allowing those to feel a need for anti-structurality and for a bond with human performers? Is it also leading to the replacement of human beings and their bodies with technology and epistemological operations? Or might contemporary theater perhaps be representing a kind of staged lab in which actor-performers are just training in new means of establishing as-yet unheard of forms of community?

These questions remain ongoingly open.

Translated by Simon Wloch

Appendix

Leszek Kolankiewicz and Dorota Sajewska

Communitas versus Performance: A Conversation

Dorota Sajewska: I think a good starting point for reflecting upon the relationship between theater and *communitas* will be the topics of conversation and communication. Thus, the form of our meeting itself might be worth considering. We have been conversing for many years. It all began with you proposing I transfer from the Theater Academy to the Department of Theater and Performance at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. That was an important experience for me, stepping away from a space of intellectual isolation and entering an academic microcommunity that is based on polyphonic dialogue. I still recall our team spending hours and hours in heated, adamant, and above all inspiring discussions. Sometimes they were somewhat harsh, but they always insisted on finding a shared intellectual space in spite of and including our differences. Later our conversations turned more private, becoming a dialogue between the two of us. I think that was because you immigrated to Paris, and I later moved to Zurich. I believe our relation is based on a *longue durée* dialogue, in which our research subjects—theory, art, and culture—recur and undergo significant changes. This is why it strikes me that a good point of departure for reflecting on *communitas* is to ask how far communication is the foundation of *communitas* (as the etymology itself would suggest!), and how far conversation, or rather the bond it forms, leads to the creation of *communitas*.

Leszek Kolankiewicz: Communication, in the sense of sharing information and of human exchange in general—social contact and personal intercourse—does, of course, have the same root as *communitas*. The two are etymologically related to the notion of participating in duties and, according to the Latin dictionaries, derive from a proto-Indo-European root that means “exchange.”⁵⁶ So we have the

⁵⁶ Michiel de Vaan (*Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages*) gives his entry for *munus*, *-eris* (with such derivatives as *communis*, *moer/unis*, *communitus*, *communicare*) the notation $\text{PIE } *m\text{-}no-$ ($*h_2m\text{-}no-$) and the definition “exchange” joining that root with the root of $\text{PIE } *m\text{-}no-$, meaning “gift”; under the *communis*, *-is*, *-e* entry, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* provides the shorter notation of $\text{PIE } *m\text{-}$ and the first definition. Both the root and this definition have been retained in the Slavic languages, e.g. in the old Polish verb *mieniać* (or the reflexive form, *mieniać się*), today only used in dialect: to exchange something between two people.

sharing of opinions, we have exchange, and we have the circulation of gifts—just as in Marcel Mauss’s famous essay.

And I also agree that the subject of our conversations, which cover on one hand the practice of theater, and on the other the experience and the idea of *communitas*, prompts us to reflect on dialogue—its function, essence, significance, and even its gravity. I need not remind you that in drama, dialogue is intimately tied to action—it is action fulfilled in speech—and as such, action is its basic substance: thus, while theater is tied to drama, dialogue is at the very core of theater. In introducing the concept of *dialogichnost'* (dialogism) and *dialogicheskoe mirooshchushchenie* (a dialogic feeling for the world), Mikhail Bakhtin transferred dialogue from the realm of poetics to that of hermeneutics, or of philosophy in general: dialogue is an alternative to the monologic, monistic discourse of power and, moreover, a way of giving voice, a recognition and acknowledgment of otherness, of radical otherness. He speaks beautifully about this in his book on Dostoevsky: “to be means to communicate dialogically”; “two voices is the minimum for existence.”

I’m glad that you began by mentioning the department and the institute. For we really did attach enormous significance to the dialogues we held there during our endless, hours-long academic sessions. For me, that was one of the three ways in which I fulfilled myself and blew off steam. The first of these was writing. I always liked writing, because the text—one pondered, tweaked, and carefully worded—is the fruit of the academic work we share. But it emerges through individual work in the laboratory, in the library, and in my private study, it is the product of inspiration that arrives while I am in retreat, in seclusion, in solitude. The second was teaching. Because I also put my heart into the seminars which I was terribly fond of and which I eagerly anticipated. My format of choice was a discussion section and I ran those for over thirty years. As the name suggests, those sections took the shape of a helpful conversation where opinions were exchanged, in which, in fact, this exchange of opinions can be considered the sole purpose of the conversation. But then the French word *conversation*, which denotes a more spontaneous and informal exchange of opinions, comes from the Latin *conversatio*: communion, remaining in close, lively contact with someone, which takes us to dialogue and the dialogic as the principles of this mode of communication. And this is more the kind of dialogue I had with students; actually, the discussion sections I organized myself, as well as the classes we taught together with my colleagues from the Institute of Polish Culture, and, later on, the seminars as well, all those were forms of dialogue; I never lectured, because I dislike the lecture as a form and I don’t know how to practice it, perhaps precisely because it is monologic and monistic par excellence. Very early on, I came to realize that I formulate thoughts differently, I come to certain conclusions differently when writing in isolation than I do when participating in dialogue-driven discussion sessions or seminars. I have had marvelous student groups where the classes were simply on fire. Not only were the participants speaking—and saying

fascinating things— but also we jointly created a dialogue situation itself, giving rise to ideas, concepts, theories. Sometimes we had a true *conversatio*: our dialogue was based on live, close, perhaps even intimate contact, on communion. And finally, the third way: the academic meeting. This is a prepared form of dialogue between experts that departs from prepared opinions and aims to verify concepts or theories. Meetings involve working together to form a conclusion based on dialogue. I always prepared for meetings, got fully involved in the discussions, and then was immersed in them as they happened, and thought about what we had managed to arrive at together. Long after a meeting, I wondered if I accepted the viewpoints that had been presented and the resulting conclusions, if I didn't want to argue about them further. In general, academic thought is the pursuit of truth, whose rigor is reminiscent of an investigation. A similar rigor prevailed in our meetings, where you could feel a degree of ruthless antagonism towards any insufficiently or unsatisfactorily formulated concepts. Such meetings therefore involved an exchange of impulses, of stimuli, aimed to help chisel out a thought, develop it fully, draw conclusions from what one says to oneself, what others say about it, and from what is formulated in the course of group discussion. The prevailing atmosphere of debate in our Institute, even if some might have seen it as intensely mobilizing, demanding, relentless, even to some degree ruthless, was nonetheless highly creative and fertile. My writings were nurtured on the spirit of those meetings. The dialogue we continue between us is a creative extension of that dialogue that took place at the department and at the institute. Even if these days we can only contact one another from afar, in my mind, keeping up the dialogue with you is of fundamental importance: it's a question of academic continuance and survival.

So our reflections on *communitas* should be a dispute, they should occur in dialogue—that mode of deliberation even imposes itself upon us here: thoughts on *communitas* would be quite bloodless if they were not formulated in dialogue. And the two of us have it right here.

DS: Allow me to return to the moment when the polyphonic discussions at the department turned into a dialogue between the two of us. How far did emigration affect the attempt or effort to continue the conversation? I am reminded of Bertolt Brecht's *Refugee Conversations*, which addresses refugees' recognition of their own difference and describes a peculiar perspective migrants have that results from distance. He wrote: "The best school for dialectics is emigration. The most penetrating dialecticians are exiles. There are changes that have forced them into exile, and they are interested only in changes." The fact that a person becomes a foreigner elsewhere, recognizes the other in themselves, experiences otherness in themselves, makes them begin to perceive changes in reality and speak about differences. They speak less about what they know than about what manifests itself in alterity, that is, listening to the Other, staying with the Other in a dynamic

dialogical connectivity. I wonder how far the experience of migration has been important for you, because for me, it marked a fundamental intellectual caesura. It changed my research interests, my optics for looking at the key problems of cultural studies—it shifted my focus away from a highly individualistic perspective, from seeing the body as singular and particular, deeply tied to identity politics, to thinking about various and altered forms of commonality. I purposefully avoid the word “community,” as it is quite compromised both politically and historically, especially by the twentieth-century totalitarianisms that used it. I would like to reflect upon commonality not so much from a sociological or a political-science standpoint, but rather in terms of anthropology. These forms of bonds with Others, maintaining relationships in social interaction with multiple actors—and not solely human ones!—regulate how we exist in the world. We can in no way imagine *communitas* without transcending the I—not as a community that is a gathering of individuals, but as bonds that must overcome the self to experience the otherness in order to share this experience with the Other; to understand the Other at all.

LK: You mentioned Brecht and his refugee experience—Brecht is kind of “your author,” isn’t he? And I immediately thought of Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s philosophy was in a sense fundamental to me. In my student days it had key, I would even say *formative* significance for us. I was most impressed by his book on Dostoevsky. The way he spoke of dialogue as a way of gaining self-awareness through voluntary acts of revealing oneself before others—acts that resulted from dialogic penetration on the part of the other. This was the route to finding the person in a person. A person in the singular, when performing introspection or even a soliloquy, a deep and sincere examination of themselves, is incapable of reaching the same truth as in dialogue, through dialogue, when they are communing with another and in that communion consent to reveal themselves.

Take Rousseau, for instance. When Rousseau sets out on his *Confessions*, he seeks, by his own example, to show his fellow creatures the whole truth of man—he ends by saying he has told it all. Yet a few years later, in response to polemicists’ attacks, he begins speaking about himself once more, starting a new autobiographical work, in a dialogue form, which he believes is the best way to show all the pros and cons: *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*. Yet this is not enough, for almost immediately after writing those *Dialogues* he sits down to write his third autobiography, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Each time it is as though he has begun the introspection anew. Yet however impressive this endless striving for self-awareness, this rejection of a definitive, forever relevant truth of himself, we still miss the impulse for dialogic penetration by another.

Meanwhile, Bakhtin shows that in Dostoevsky this dialogic penetration, and self-revealing as a response to it, can practically be a paroxysm—dialogue takes place in an atmosphere where everything must touch a person to the quick, “provoke him, interrogate him, even polemicize with him.” The creation of

“extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth” occurs—as such, the point is not a positive embodiment of truth, but finding a mode for “searching after truth, provoking it, and, most importantly, testing it.” All this “strives to provide, as it were, the words and acts of a person, each of which contains the whole man, the whole of his life in its entirety.” The truth is in the clash between people communing. This truth is inextricable from the process of reaching it and it is never absolute: it is always subject to revision, for a dialogue never ends. Thus, the truth at which one arrives through dialogue is unlike the truth that results from individual interrogation.

The same applies to academic studies: scholars do not allow a truth to congeal into a dogma; it is being forever called into question, undermined, and revised. We must not lose sight of the fact that academic studies are grounded in a disinterested pursuit of the truth, and on a cognitive approach that requires an openness to all that is unknown and mysterious. The world of our experience is complex, it is not monolithic, it encompasses a multitude of figures and voices. Thus, it appears to refugees: in a sense, scholars, researchers, are refugees from the world of well-worn and conventional views, opinions, and convictions. Yet their dialogue, grounded in the search for points of contact, overlapping judgments, always has the pursuit of a non-particular truth on the horizon, as well as of the community which excludes no one, and in this sense, is universal.

You mentioned that the word “community” has been politically and historically compromised. Yes, today the *Theater of Community*—Kazimierz Braun’s book-length manifesto of 1972—would have to change its title. Perhaps a danger always lurks in the ambition to build a community. Victor Turner, who introduced the concept of *communitas* to the humanities and to sociology, realized this danger all too well, which may be why he used the Latin term. He cautioned against the blindness and one-sidedness of building communities, he warned against their fanatical tendencies: “if *communitas* is maximized, it becomes in a short while its own dark shadow, totalitarianism,” he wrote. “When *communitas* becomes force rather than ‘grace,’ it becomes totalism.” This does not mean the very idea of the community is compromised, but I do understand your wariness or even reluctance towards this term. *Communitas* is a better word. According to the *Thesaurus Linguae Latine*, it has many meanings. Let’s have a look.⁵⁷ (Like Turner and Ryszard Kapuściński, I always have my dictionaries at the ready.) The first one is “joint possession, common share in something, a community of something.” The second, and, to my mind, the key definition is: “fellowship, bond, familiarity, relations, a sense of human connectivity, a social/collective sensibility.” I would call attention to that social aptitude, the impulse to step out toward the other—toward what we extravagantly call a “community,” with its organized

⁵⁷ TLL vol. 03:1984–1985.

form in mind. A social aptitude is a humbler notion than a community, though it drives us toward it. The same goes for human communion—it is less than a community, it is at the heart of that impulse to step out toward the other, that drive. The third meaning is: “shared qualities, similarity, links, contact.” Finding points of contact, the very bonds of what we share. And finally, a figurative meaning: “obligingness, humanity.” Here we have an image of non-confinement and even of an amiable mindset, or at least an openness to dialogue. As Turner says, “the *communitas* spirit presses always to universality.” It was precisely for this meaning of *communitas* that Turner gave it precedence over “community,” which, in the sociological concepts preceding Turner’s anthropological theory, meant a form of social organization. Turner’s *communitas* is not Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft*. *Communitas* is anti-structural by definition: it creates an anti-structure with its liminality. But while an anti-structural agent, it remains a part of a structure, buried within it, animating it.

DS: You spoke of the utopian dimension of *communitas*, of the perspective that appears with an integral mode of perception, with difference and otherness internalized within myself. One suddenly perceives the possibility of a universal social structure, one that transcends all differences (social, class-based, ethnic, economic, cultural, sexual, etc.) and does not strive to produce new ideological-totalitarian forms. This could be a starting point for considering *communitas* as a reflection upon the relativity of all structures. A structure is a construct which does not exist, it is always political, ideological, or more broadly speaking, performatively produced. What we are accustomed to calling a community in sociology, like Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft*, perhaps best corresponds to the first dictionary meaning of *communitas*, “joint possession.” Tönnies’s sociopolitical idea was to oppose the community (*Gemeinschaft*) to the society (*Gesellschaft*) based on a capitalist, individual myth of possession, to find the other forms of coexistence he posited: family, neighborhood, village. Forms of being together in which goods can be jointly managed. This means that goods and things remained of capital importance in this concept. What distinguishes Turner’s *communitas* from the previous sociological concepts is that it is not at all about possession. To be someone, one need not, and even *can not* possess the Other. What French philosophers like Badiou or Nancy would remodel in every case, that *communauté* is co-sharing with someone and not co-possessing, was already in Turner’s writings. Key to the concept of *communitas* is Turner’s shift of stress to common participation, to what opens up to coexistence, co-being, togetherness, a certain bond, connection, or search for points of convergence while maintaining diversity. Thinking of *communitas* as a process, as a dynamic coexistence and ongoing exchange, we sidestep the danger of its transforming into a permanent structure, into an ideologized or even totalitarian community. The question is if

communitas remains merely a kind of a utopia or a metaphor, or if it is something that can be experienced as a reality.

LK: Precisely, we cannot stress enough that for Turner, *communitas* is basically and above all an experience. In outlining the bonds of *communitas*, Turner stressed they are “undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, nonrational (though not irrational,) I-Thou or Essential We relationships,” with this last aspect “in Feuerbach’s and Buber’s sense.” For Martin Buber, the I-It relationship (*Ich-Es-Beziehung*) is based on the experience of It as an object separate from the I, and on its use—it is an objectifying relationship, whereas the I-Thou relationship (*Ich-Du-Beziehung*) is subjective, or perhaps it is a relationship as such, a coexistence of partners, a communing between two subjects or within a single subject, but defined as a relationship. According to Buber, a person existentially becomes themselves and fulfilled in a relationship. Turner also makes reference, we often forget, to Ludwig Feuerbach, to his anthropology praising human relationships based on love: “homo homini deus est” (man is man’s God). (Though Feuerbach’s philosophy was criticized by Marx, it remains a vital link in the chain from Hegel to Marx: the eleven *Theses on Feuerbach* brilliantly summarize Marx’s early period.) Feuerbach’s anthropology is not only fundamentally sensualist, rooting human beings in the body and the empirical stuff of sensory experience as direct knowledge, but also, in concentrating on the dialogue between I and Thou, it is a forerunner to the philosophy of dialogue or the encounter. In communing with another, a person ceases to be a person in the ordinary sense of the word, achieving a unity of I and Thou, becoming a god—a bit like in Gombrowicz’s “humanly human mass,” wouldn’t you say? For Turner, an existential *communitas* is pivotal, a *communitas* he calls spontaneous. What appeals to me the most in Turner’s definition of *communitas* is the association with flow experience. In a process where, as in Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, the structure is put in brackets, disrupted, suspended; where we enter an experience as if submitting to a wave. In the flow of communion, of the I-Thou encounter, we feel a transformation. The experience of *communitas* liberates and transforms, it justifies all our ordeals in social structures. In writing on *communitas*, Turner uses words which today we would perhaps avoid, as they have a quasi-religious feel: “mercy,” “love.” Love is nothing other than an experience—either you experience it or it does not exist. I get the feeling that Turner takes to this description, as it is vital to him to stress the direct and spontaneous nature of the experience of *communitas*.

DS: Directness and spontaneity do not necessarily imply the ephemerality of the experience of *communitas*. It would be a simplification to assume that if *communitas* is experienced as spontaneous, then it is a kind of a temporal, a momentary, or a fleeting bond. *Communitas* may not undergo transformation into an ideological community, it may survive as a kind of interconnectivity that is processual and constantly changing, a bond that morphs and transforms like love. Even if it is

a spontaneous and direct experience, love need not be momentary or fleeting. It is a bond that transforms in time and is experienced in the flow, in the dynamic of the I-Thou relationship and in the process of the *longue durée*.

ŁK: One attribute of the *communitas* experience is temporality. When we experience something fully, we have no doubt that we experience it: it overtakes us, consumes us, envelops us entirely, we are overwhelmed by it—nothing outside of it exists. This is a trait of full experiences: physical and mental, sensory and unspeakable. But later, when we try to recall them, when they are mere recollections, we began to doubt we truly experienced them, or indeed if they could ever have happened to us at all. I have this in mind when I speak of the temporality of experiences. They are not enduring. Hermann Hesse showed this brilliantly in his short novel *Journey to the East*. Perhaps every wanderer who makes the effort to travel, who suffers the discomfort of being a refugee, but who also knows the beauty of experiencing the unknown, the sensory enchantment and seduction of the different, finds that their experience dissipates like a dream after the adventure. It is a Shakespearean truth, as in *The Tempest* (“We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep”). Our experience dissolves like a dream and ultimately we are unsure of whether it ever occurred. At the heart of the experience is a flow, which gives it a pulse and an intensity, but also prevents it from being kept, preserved, stored. You’ve studied this, you know what I’m talking about.

You said something that really resonates with me, that *communitas* cannot be defined as a type of structure, as a purposeful form of organization. People might get together and say, now we’ll produce a certain kind of relationship and, for instance, as an exercise group we will perform a *communitas*, and then we’ll stick to it as a structure. Yet it cannot be done. This is an express road to the birth of totalitarianism, when some come along and whip others in line, saying: “You can only get into the *communitas*, which I define as such-and-such, by doing such-and-such.” Meanwhile, *communitas* is always a big experiment. Just like love, which is also a process of sorts. And *communitas* cannot be a thing that is set once and for all, though it does involve a repetition.

Here a question raises itself: Does *communitas* coincide with theater, or doesn’t it? Theater, which itself is repetition. Even if we presuppose that theater is a repetition without an original, it is still a repetition. Antonin Artaud dreamed of a theater that ceased to be a repetition, but in doing so, he did away with theater as such.

DS: Indeed the issue of repetition is key to the relationship between *communitas* and theater. On the one hand, we have the experience of temporality and the uniqueness of a single theater event; on the other, theater as a medium is about presence in repetition and about duration through repetition.

Yet I would like to return to the manifestations of *communitas* and to reflect more deeply on the nature of the experience of togetherness. Latin has a plural form of *communitas*: *communitates*, which designates communities that are varied, multiple, and countable. Yet I get the feeling that, for Turner, viewing *communitas* in the singular was key. *Communitas* as uncountable is a thing that cannot be collected or gathered as a commodity. At the base of this lies the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *communitas*. *Gemeinschaft* presumes the existence of various communities, which are interchangeable, countable, definable, etc. This is why *communitas* should not be translated as “community.”

LK: If only with regard for the special content of the expression, we should keep it in the Latin form.

DS: Furthermore, Latin is by now a language sufficiently foreign that bringing it back into the humanist discourse is a performative act itself! I enjoy returning not only to reading Turner, but also to the transformative idea of *communitas*, which, in the context of today’s global dominance of the English language, has acquired a certain strangeness. It seems to me that through its strangeness this concept might have a certain agency, prompting new ways of perceiving interpersonal relations, but also of reflecting upon bonds that go beyond the purely human experience and enter relations with other ontological beings, whether biological, technological, or geological. A human being, immersed in the world of nature and animals, of things and technology, is merely one actor in a dense network of relationships, as Bruno Latour asserts. This is why we also have to focus on forms of commonality that go beyond human ones. It seems to me that, particularly in the context of the post-anthropocentric turn, the concept of *communitas* has undeveloped theoretical potential, and thus is worth reinvestigating.

At this point I would like to return to the relationship between *communitas* and theater, to the experience of commonality in the theater, an art form which both in its creative process and in its reception is “sentenced” to collectivity, to a multitude. Again, we return to the encounter and to a communing of two fields of the humanities: anthropology on the one hand, and on the other, theater in a dual sense—as an artistic practice, but also as a way of reflecting upon culture. The idea of a theatrical *communitas* was born in dialogue, and its basis was the intellectual friendship of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. It would seem no accident that, on the one hand, we have a social, and later a cultural anthropologist, and on the other, a theater practitioner. This transformation occurred through the experience of an utterly different academic environment. Intellectual journeys initiate profound changes in one’s own field of study. Without Turner, it would be difficult to imagine the emergence of performance studies. Through his friendship with Schechner, Turner’s reflections on *communitas* were increasingly bound up with experiences which, if not strictly theatrical, used the metaphor of

theater as a creative state and with his conviction about the performative nature of interpersonal bonds. One cannot conceive of *communitas* except as a process of sorts that leads to creative acts. This bond, therefore, is a certain kind of creativity, and not a natural state.

LK: Turner was lucky he began a dialogue with Richard Schechner, who, with his close ties to the theater community, especially to the neo-avant-garde, gave him the opportunity to express himself in new contexts. Turner could leave behind the context of the African Ndembu tribe, about which he wrote. I think the American humanities stimulated Turner's concepts, breathed new life into them. He devoted himself to the anthropology of experience, he titled one of his last lectures "Body, Brain, and Culture." The title of his final book, his posthumous opus, is telling: *The Anthropology of Performance*. The title alone shows the influence of his dialogue with Schechner. They affected one another: Turner's influence can be seen in Schechner's *Between Theater & Anthropology* (again, the title alone is significant.) There Schechner wrote a preface, here Turner wrote a foreword: an utterly mutual relationship.

In his later works, Turner approached some neo-avant-garde theater experiments with a dose of reserve. He bristled upon realizing that the Western theater is setting out to organize experiences that he associates with Ndembu rituals. Clearly frightened, he saw in those experiments the intent "to create new forms of ritual initiation," which unfortunately reminded him "not only of circumcision rites in Central Africa but also of [Leni Riefenstahl's] *Triumph of the Will*." In a piece, the photocopy of which Konstancy Puzyna brought from his PhD program in New York, "Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting"—where Turner noted once more that man conserves through structure and grows through anti-structure—Turner commented on descriptions of Grotowski's paratheatrical experiments, which he discovered through my brochure, *On the Road to Active Culture*. He wondered about the point of creating contemporary postmodern rituals, the stated aim of which was to "form men and women in a humanistic image which is to replace older forms, especially those carried in the great religious traditions," while at the same time, Grotowski's "rhetoric is religious." Schechner arrived at a similar point in *The Future of Ritual*, though not through Grotowski, but through a publication, *Shaman's Drum: A Journal of Experimental Shamanism*. This is the root of our caution and mistrust, both yours and mine, though yours is probably greater, as well as of the wariness and suspicion in Turner and Schechner. To Turner's mind, Grotowski's intention is "the making of a new classless or 'unalienated' man," whom he creates through "the sophisticated elaboration of new secularized rites of passage." It is true that Turner linked *communitas* to liminality in one great anti-structural concept—he thought *communitas* was best expressed in liminality, in flow, in everything that subverts a stabilized structure—yet he was no naïf, striving to develop new rites

of passage with a mandatory liminal phase, leading to what he called “a new totalizing process of reliminalization,” which can easily be exploited by a totalitarian regime. For Turner, modern man was not a grand *persona* of tribal culture, but a being composed of a *persona* and an individual—and as an individual they do not experience liminality, only liminoidality. The *persona*, generally understood as a set of social roles based on an individual status, belongs to the social structure—as Turner puts it: “the *persona* works.” The individual is the effect of the individual’s experience of *communitas*: “the individual plays.” I remember how, during Erika Fischer-Lichte’s visit to Poland, during her first reading at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw, she did not distinguish between liminality and liminoidality, and in the discussion I recalled how fundamental this distinction was for Turner. While the social dimension of the *persona* is the activated social structure, the social dimension of the individual is, according to Turner, “*communitas*, essentially a liminoid, voluntaristic mode of relating, a choosing of one another by total, integral human beings.” This is why art, including postmodern art, is a place to search for the experience of *communitas*.

One is reminded of a concept coined by the cultural and theater sociologist Jean Duvignaud, which he laid out in a marvelous though little-known book, *Le don du rien: Essai d’anthropologie de la fête*. There he calls attention to practices utterly devoid of the mercantile, or even the utilitarian as such. From the point of view of a shopkeeper, and therefore a capitalist, they are, of course, incomprehensible, mad. Duvignaud wants a gift-giving practice in which there is no place for compensation, for speculation as to whether the gift is to someone’s benefit. This is a game of extravagance, of giving something that is lost *à fond*. The joy to be derived is greater than the possible satisfaction from the speculated advantages of trade with God or with history. This is a situation where a person possesses nothing, yet makes a gift from that nothing. Some artists practice something similar—particularly those who dream of a *communitas* through art. Those practices are priceless.

DS: Perhaps we ought to look more closely at the relationship between community and *communitas* in the theater itself, as theater is a thoroughly communal art. Firstly it is produced collectively, in an ensemble, and secondly, viewed by an audience, which is always in the plural. Theater has commonality indelibly inscribed into it. However, can every kind of meeting of a theater community and community in the theater then mean *communitas*? Is *communitas* reserved for particular moments or specific experiences of togetherness? How to note, name, and describe the experience of *communitas* in a theater community? Can it be singled out and defined? Or is it maybe something we only project upon theater? Is the experience of *communitas* tied to a crisis in society? You mentioned the category of liminality, but for Turner the concept of a crisis was just as important in considering *communitas*. Is a crisis experienced inside a theater community a moment which lets us

approach *communitas*? Not a communion, not a total merging and a production of a new quality, only a moment of experiencing a crisis, a rupture, or a breakup of a social structure, of which, being in the theater, we are always a part.

ŁK: My intuition tells me that this is the path, perhaps even a privileged one, to experiencing *communitas*. Let me come back to Bakhtin, who finds moments of this dialogic penetration, this self-exposure, through provocation, torment, through excess—things that shunt a person out of the ordinary sense of self that provides the basis for their routine functions—through crisis moments. This was shown brilliantly in Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. The film's protagonist, Graham, seeks highly intimate confessions from women concerning their fantasies and sexual experience. He is a heterosexual man, but he is impotent, and compensates for this by watching videos of women's confessions. Thus, his interlocutors do not feel in danger of being sexually molested by him and decide to tell him things they would probably tell no one else. These are moments of self-exposure, as in Rousseau, as in Dostoevsky. Graham has a real collection of videotapes of these confessions. We might say that he has reached a truth about other human beings, a truth that these people voluntarily wanted to reveal before him. Yet something is missing. There is no tension or intensity so typically found in the crisis moments of which you speak. Graham has a crisis when it strikes him that the truth is not in the confessions formulated in words, the truth is in the stirring power of the *communitas*, which he desires and from which he is barred. He realizes that it is not through the words spoken to the camera, to the medium, that he can reach another human being, but through the event of the touch, through the process of meeting that occurs in speechless physical proximity. This prompts a great existential crisis: recognizing, in a sudden flash, that there is truth, and there is another truth. The truth of a relatively safe confession and the truth of *communitas*, requiring the risk of involvement. This leads the protagonist to destroy his collection, his whole archive of confessions.

DS: You mentioned that Turner's last book was called *The Anthropology of Performance*. Yet analyzing *communitas* as being in a dialectical relationship with crisis, we can see it as opposed to performance. It can be perceived neither in terms of symbolic efficacy as Lévi-Strauss would have it, nor in terms of failure, as Jack Halberstam calls acts of performative negativity. The experience of *communitas* is unverifiable in terms of success/failure, effectiveness/ineffectiveness. I believe that Turner's anthropology of performance holds a potential which, through reflecting upon *communitas*, may reveal a way unlike what we have known.

ŁK: I fully agree. To me *performance*, which derives from the old French *parformer* (a bastardization of *parfournir*), "to effectuate something, finish something up," has always primarily been its French definition: an athlete's results, a machine's

achievements, a good test result, or someone's feat, such as a man's sexual exploits. Thus, a person's performance is their accomplishments expressed in quantifiable, measurable, and countable terms. To my mind, the concept of performance has a capitalist spirit. Small wonder, then, that there was eventually a backlash against the extraordinary proliferation of this concept in the social sciences and humanities, against the imperial quality of performance studies—a backlash as in Jack Halberstam's book on the art of failure. I would say that the same circles that were promoting the concept of performance are now excited by the art of failure, such is the nature of fashions in academia. As for myself, I didn't have to wait for Halberstam to appreciate the art of failure, which I knew from Artaud. Artaud experienced failure both as the creator of the Theater of Alfred Jarry and the Theater of Cruelty, which was artistically unfulfilling because theoretically it was an impossible theater, and as a man who spent many years in a mental ward, where he passed away. Yet his impact was immense: the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* is an emblematic play of counterculture theater and two of Derrida's studies were inspired by his writings, above all *The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation*: what a fecund sort of failure! At any rate, no point in searching for *communitas* where we find performance, because the two cancel each other out.

DS: I would say the same. That is why Steven Soderbergh's brilliant film strikes me as such a fascinating example. It is crucial that the protagonist is heterosexual and impotent, and thus, in terms of the dominant heteronormative framework, he can't perform! This establishes the anti-structurality of his existence, which cannot be entirely transformed into a structure. That is the "less" of which you spoke. It is another interesting aspect of the concept of *communitas* that something may be less than a structure. Roberto Esposito characterizes this as the "minus" in "munus" which is the core of the experience of being together. It is "less" not "more" that creates favorable conditions for *communitas* to emerge. As in Jean Duvignaud's notion, which we mentioned above, as a gift out of nothing. In his notion those who have nothing share it, just in order to be together with others. This is not counted as any kind of profit or possession.

Let me come back to what you said about touch. Touch is an interesting aspect of how the body functions in *communitas*. It is a kind of demonstration of a point of convergence between I and Thou. I touch you, yet I do not enter you, I do not absorb or devour you, I do not make a unit of I and Thou. We touch, but we retain a difference, though we also have that point of contact, a kind of bond produced by the body, or rather on the surface of the body. Perhaps the social sense, the social affect and intuition appear on that surface. Only when I touch you do I feel we exist in a relationship, which can be called an interconnectivity. Something emerges that is more than just an "I" as a closed, isolated individual.

LK: Speaking of touch, we should recall *The Marriage* by Witold Gombrowicz, which explores this topic in an exceedingly rigorous way. The titular marriage is a *communitas* as Gombrowicz imagines it—in his work, unfortunately, it always takes the form of a ritual. So it is in *The Marriage*, in *Pornografia*, and so it is in *Cosmos*. But can one hold one's own wedding? Henry is an overman (Nietzsche's Übermensch): he wants to rule all others, and he wants to perform the marriage ritual through touch. He refuses to be touched, but he will touch others, anyone he pleases: this is a sign of power. Yet he dreams of a "humanly human mass" with no transcendental sanction, a mass in which people illegally form communes, *communitas* without God, without a father or a mother. This "humanly human mass" is, of course, a profoundly anti-structural move: it is lawless, it defies tradition. It is savage. At any rate, its priest is the Drunkard, a Polish Devil. But this "humanly human mass" is, of course, a denial of ritual—in this case, the ritual of marriage, which Henry ultimately fails to enact. Gombrowicz's vision really speaks to me, as a price is paid for this experience of *communitas*—as for anything of any value. There is a risk, a crisis, there is at least liminoidality, or even liminality: hard to say what will happen. If a person supposes they can secure themselves entirely, they have a performance in mind, a spaceship battle. For when you fire of a rocket with astronauts, you first have to give everything careful thought, calculate, then conscientiously check if all the screws are screwed in as they should be, if there isn't a leak somewhere, right? In a performance everything must go according to plan—they tell you what to do and how, and then take you from point to point. The experience of *communitas* is the reverse: it is meant to entail risk, crisis, it is meant to preserve life and meaning. In art there are no securities and there are no guarantees. There should not be engineers, trainers, and monitors for *communitas*.

DS: *The Marriage* presents a subversive vision of the notion of performance. Henry wants to perform his marriage, yet at the same time, in the idea of the marriage or the "humanly human mass" in which all the hierarchies are suspended, we see an upending of the performativity of the cultural performance. After all, a marriage ought to preserve all the hierarchies: it should be conferred by a priest, the parents should be there to give their blessing, etc. In *The Marriage* all this, the very idea of marriage as a ceremony and a ritual, is negated. The marriage in *The Marriage* is shown as something which, paradoxically, does not meet the conditions of the cultural performance in its classical definition, though the attempts are absolutely performative. What shatters this performance, what makes it fail, as you put it, is its savagery. I would go a step further. It has an obscenity that breaks down the performance and prevents it from taking on a structured form. There are parts of *The Marriage* in which Austin's performance through language (not only through body and the circumstances that ensure the execution of the performance) fails. Instead of language as a medium of power relations, we have a peculiar part of the body—a finger. A finger has its own performative power: it can be placed in

a mouth, sucked, and then taken out again (which comes to the fore in Gombrowicz's last novel, *Cosmos!*) A finger exposes all the abject and obscene features that tear down structures. The bodily experiences carefully concealed by culture and society also belong to *communitas*. One of Turner's books compares *communitas* to a state of illness, sexuality, death, experiments, to the most radical and critical moments of human existence. Obscenity could play a function in creating this negative *communitas*.

LK: I'm glad you brought that up. Turner elsewhere mentions that "*communitas* perhaps even more importantly than sex tends to get repressed into the unconscious." We live every day in a society and perhaps we do not wish to hear about the *communitas* that is the source of that structure, without which there would be no society. *Communitas*, after all, is a social sense in itself—without this sense people would never manage to unite. Yet *communitas* is repressed into the unconscious. This could be because *communitas* provides a critique of structures, it is fundamentally anti-structural.

Dostoevsky examined this paradox in "The Grand Inquisitor." Christ comes to Seville, and the Grand Inquisitor says: "Sorry, you can keep on going, people don't need what you have to give." Here is the great question: how could the notion of *agápē*, of love as the greatest of the three theological virtues, love fulfilled in *communitas*, give rise to that all-encompassing structure, ruthlessly persecuting the disobedient, throwing them into dungeons and burning them at the stake. What is anti-structural is foreign to church, even though that is what it arose from.

DS: The designed state of social structure rejects the people's dark instincts and their undersides, which are tied to savagery and sexuality, to danger, to death, to anxiety about illness. Those are profoundly human experiences, deeply rooted in every one of us, and yet they are strongly repressed. Nor are they present in sociological theories of the community. If issues of death or sexuality do appear in them, it is more in terms of managing them through mechanisms established in a given community.

LK: In *Funeral Rites*, Jean Genet went further than Gombrowicz. Speaking of his love for a murdered boy, he entered the darkness of yearning and despair. He spoke of funeral rites as Gombrowicz spoke of the marriage. He described them as an invented ritual through which to achieve *communitas*. This is a dark "Hymn of Love," a dark "Spiritual Canticle." The reverse of Saint Paul and the reverse of Saint John of the Cross. There is an inverted, dark sublimity—a depth. Genet goes further than Gombrowicz: he goes to the edge of *communitas*, the edge of love, which knows no limits of customs or morality, which is boundless.

DS: We could mention other examples of the boundless dark space of love. I just thought of the film *In the Realm of the Senses* by Nagisa Ōshima. The director's

point of departure was the Marxist diagnosis of the impoverished servant who enters a sexual relationship to earn money for a house. Yet any exploration of sociopolitical reality here is utterly discarded in favor of the emerging *communitas*, the boundless love. *In the Realm of the Senses* speaks of the master/servant relationship, but also of the inconceivable potential of intimacy, sexuality, obscenity, and of death proffered in the name of love.

LK: That film by Nagisa Ōshima, based on a true story, goes beyond social critique. True, it is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, which it nonetheless demystifies—it is not by chance that a film whose original title was *Bullfight of Love* was played in France as *L'Empire des sens*, alluding to the title of the Barthes book on Japan. There is a memorable moment when the protagonists—a hotel owner and a maid—swap kimonos: they transcend not only their gender and class limitations, but also free themselves of all they are repressing and suppressing. Their experience is a physical one, naturally, in which they achieve that giddy summit of Eros and Thanatos—where *les extrêmes se touchent*. We should recall that Freud's later works no longer speak of the libido but of Eros and, following up on Sabina Spielrein, the encounter between Eros and Thanatos.

DS: Let's go back to where we began, to the idea that dialogue and the bond produced in communication can also be valuable when they appear as a kind of cruelty toward oneself. *Communitas* does not mean a shared presence solely based on the bright side of human existence. Darkness rounds off the picture of humanity.

If we are to explore the realm of the corporeal, we can hardly ignore our present context, the pandemic, and the situation in which the globally administered and locally enforced lockdowns of our bodies demand a radical transformation and a reimagining. I think there will be no return to the kind of physicality we once knew. This does not mean that our bodies have vanished, but that they are transforming. Bodies made captive through isolation grow distant from one another. The key word is “distance.” Along with it, our communication and ways of interacting are intensively dematerializing. Let's just fantasize for a moment. How far will *communitas* still be possible in the post-pandemic world? How will we have to reinvent it? Must we redefine the body, touch, closeness?

LK: The first thought that comes to me is that your experience of the pandemic lockdown and mine are certainly different because of our age groups. First I felt isolated: I became aware of my age when it turned out I could go shopping only during senior hours—I met almost exclusively elderly people on the streets and in shops, though the word “met” is an overstatement here—I only *saw* them. A person doesn't reflect on their age, and almost never thinks about being perhaps advanced in age. A person always thinks they are younger than they truly are,

and that they've got unlimited opportunities for experiences in front of them, that it's all theirs for the taking. In lockdown I was reminded of something I read in Jung; that when a person turns thirty, or, as Dante says at the opening of *The Divine Comedy*, "nel mezzo del cammin," is midway along their path in life, they begin turning more toward their inner world.

To respond to your question, I should start by saying that my lockdown experience in the pandemic was not the same as young people's, who are always focused on the outer world, on sensory experience, through touch, and thus on what is Interhuman. This was so important for Buber, and decisive for Gombrowicz. For them a person was the Interhuman. There they become a person. How is the I-Thou relationship possible through Zoom or Google Meeting or whatever else? We have made prostheses that provide the experience of touch at a distance, but is that the same? The lockdown might be compared to a moon landing, with the astronauts being shut into their cabins for an extended period of time. It might be compared to a hospital stay. I've had that experience a few times: I know what it means to be forced to lie down, to have limits placed on movement and on many ordinary activities. A person's world keeps shrinking as they age. The space surrounding them is smaller and smaller, until finally they're in their bed, and they'll never rise. People my age are forced to experience these limitations, but for us this is neither a punishment nor an injustice, as it is for my students: the fact that twenty-something youngsters are shut in their homes just seems unjust to me. They've been robbed of their youth, their chance to be active, their experiences—they've been robbed of their lives.

Probably you're right, unfortunately, when you say there's no returning to the old relationships involving touch. When I returned from a trip to Brazil, where people are used to being close and touching each other in conversation, I felt rather awkward in Europe and I realized that all of us here are terribly square. And then when I came back from a trip to Japan, I missed their distance and the polite bowing. Coming out of lockdown, we're going to have to learn a new culture, like we've returned from a faraway journey. The new culture will perhaps be more Japanese than Brazilian.

DS: That's not a bad summation of our talk. Only one question remains: since we've met through Zoom, have we had a conversation or haven't we?

Translated by Soren Gauger



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Abstract

Toward Theatrical *Communitas*

The term *communitas*, introduced into anthropological discourse by Victor Turner in the late 1960s, returned to humanist debates at the threshold of the twenty-first century by way of Roberto Esposito. Referring to Esposito's concept of *communitas*, this essay brings out the anthropological tradition in thinking about the common, which Esposito had marginalized. The present author emphasized the importance of processuality and anti-structural dimensions of egalitarian forms of togetherness, along with their potential to liberate human capacities of creativity. Examining the relation between *munus* and *ludus*, she shows theatricality residing immanently in the root of *communitas*. Focusing on the aesthetic and creative dimensions of togetherness helps in detecting multiple forms of commonality, and indicates various models of theatrical *communitas*. Exploring a non-normative, transformative potential in experimental theater (Jerzy Grotowski, Sarah Kane, Ron Athey, Krzysztof Garbaczewski), she emphasizes collective, temporal, and excessive natures of theater that eschews the market-driven economy, along with the importance of a transversal *communitas* where the human being is only one of many actors. Some threads of the argumentation are expanded upon in a conversation with Leszek Kolankiewicz, included as an appendix.

Keywords

communitas, avant-garde theater, non-performance, excess, uselessness, queer community, transversal community

Abstrakt

Ku teatralnej *communitas*

Pojęcie *communitas*, wprowadzone do dyskursu antropologicznego przez Victora Turnera pod koniec lat 60. XX wieku, powróciło do debaty humanistycznej u progu XXI wieku za sprawą Roberta Esposito. Niniejszy esej przywraca zmarginalizowaną przez Esposito antropologiczną tradycję w myśleniu o tym, co wspólne. Autorka podkreśla znaczenie procesualności i antystrukturalności egalitarnych form bycia razem oraz ich potencjał wyzwiania kreatywności. Analizując relację między *munus* a *ludus*, ukazuje teatralność

jako immanentną właściwość *communitas*. Skupienie na estetycznych i twórczych aspektach wspólnotowości pozwala odsłonić i nazwać wiele jej form oraz scharakteryzować rozmaite modele teatralnej *communitas*. Autorka wskazuje na nienormatywny i transformacyjny potencjał teatru eksperymentalnego (Jerzy Grotowski, Sarah Kane, Ron Athey, Krzysztof Garbaczewski), by podkreślić kolektywny, efemeryczny i ekscesywny charakter teatru wymykającego się ekonomii rynku, a także uwydatnić znaczenie transwersalnej *communitas*, w której człowiek jest tylko jednym z wielu aktorów. Niektóre wątki argumentacji zostały rozwinięte w umieszczonej w aneksie rozmowie z Leszkiem Kolankiewiczem.

Słowa kluczowe

communitas, awangarda teatralna, bezproduktywność, eksces, bezużyteczność, wspólnota queer, wspólnota transwersalna

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